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ABSTRACT

This report outlines the characteristics that appear to make the process of action research effective in improving student outcomes and summarizes some strategies that practitioners believe can be transferred using the process. Part 1 describes the process followed by the successful projects and shares the insights they gained. Characteristics that correlate with a high degree of success are organized in line with these five stages of the action research process: analysis; planning and preparation; action, monitoring, adjusting; evaluation; and "next steps." Part 2 summarizes intervention strategies applied during action research and outlines some issues colleges reported during their implementation. A table lists the strategy with corresponding comments, a collation of the insights gained by the colleges. The appendix gives a list of colleges participating in the Round 2 program and a list of 41 references on the nature and use of action research and case study methods in educational research. (YLB)

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Improving colleges through action research

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Improving Colleges through Action Research

Sue Cousin

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To every complex problem there is a simple solution...

...(and it's wrong).

Colleges in this study have abandoned the search for a simple solution. Instead, they have used the action research process to bring about improvements to student retention, achievement, and other indicators such as enrolment. This report summarises the main characteristics of the process they have undertaken.

Acknowledgements:

This report is a testimony to the dedication of the many teachers, managers and support workers who make a difference to the lives of an increasing number of students choosing to participate in post-compulsory education. The 87 colleges whose action research development projects have been evaluated in this report are listed in the Appendix. Thanks go to the project managers in the colleges, particularly to Edie Corner, Gill Alton and Nic Robinson, for their comments on the pilot evaluations.

Thanks are also due to Dr Paul Martinez, who designed the programme of action research, and commented on an earlier version of this report; to Dr Bridget Somekh, who commented on the initial checklist for analysis; and to the team of consultants, who have been stimulating and supportive colleagues during the course of the Raising Quality and Achievement (RQA) Programme and the evaluation of this round of projects.

Summary

Teachers and education managers often look for the 'silver bullet', the one strategy that will solve a problem. Over the last few years in FE colleges, *the problem* has been to raise student retention and achievement rates in line with government directives and with teachers' and managers' own values. This problem has become more complex due to the changing context within which colleges operate. The climate is one of rapid and fundamental change, including convergence of funding towards the sector average, widening participation and expanding curriculum choice.

It has become increasingly clear that there is no single solution that will work for all education and training institutions, for all courses within a single institution, or even for a single course year on year. What is needed is a process of problem solving and implementation of solutions which will work to bring about improvements. Action research is a convenient and relatively well-known way of developing and applying this process.

This action research has been conducted in colleges, but the findings would seem to be applicable to all types of provider within the new Learning and Skills Sector and, indeed, to educational institutions more generally.

This report evaluates a large-scale programme of action research and analyses the characteristics that are needed to make it successful. Of the 87 college projects evaluated for this report, 66 brought about improvements to student outcomes and most reported additional benefits. During the course of the programme, colleges have learned a great deal about applying the principles of action research in the current FE context, to encourage innovation and achieve improvement.

Introduction

The RQA Programme

The Raising Quality and Achievement (RQA) Programme was launched in the summer of 1999. This programme is sponsored by the DfEE (now DfES) in support of the government drive to raise standards in the FE sector. The RQA Programme was developed by the Further Education Development Agency (FEDA), now the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA), in collaboration with the Association of Colleges (AoC) and comprises several strands of activity:

- a Quality Improvement Team (QIT) to provide consultancy support
- a benchmarking and information service
- networks to disseminate good practice
- training and networking support in respect of governance and leadership
- a Quality Information and Advice Service (QIAS) to provide front-line information, advice and referral
- development projects based on an action research model to improve student achievement and retention.

This study evaluates the effectiveness of the action research development projects funded during the 1999/2000 academic year, representing Round 2 of the programme. It follows on from Martinez (2001) whose report discusses the results of the Round 1 studies.

The aims of this report are to:

- outline the characteristics which appear to make the process of action research effective in improving student outcomes
- summarise some of the strategies that practitioners feel can be transferred using this process.

The case studies from both rounds are available on the RQA website: www.rqa.org.uk.

Round 2

Round 2 was established in autumn 1999 and the action research development projects were followed from their inception with support from LSDA. Support given to colleges includes:

- a consultant to help refine action plans, assist in their implementation and monitoring, and advise on case study write-ups
- three seminars: the first one to introduce the concept of action research and help with planning; an interim seminar to provide networking opportunities and the chance to present interim findings to fellow action researchers; a concluding seminar to pull together learning points. The second seminar was themed, to allow colleges undertaking similar work to compare notes and share good practice
- guidance notes on how to write up the case study

- a payment of £2500 for the case study write-up. The aim of the programme was to involve as large a number of colleges as possible, in order to create a broad database and to build research capacity in the sector.

Report Outline

Part One of this report describes the process followed by the successful projects and shares the insights they gained. **Part Two** summarises some of the strategies applied during the action research and outlines some of the issues reported by the colleges.

The **Appendix** gives a list of colleges participating in the Round 2 programme, whose case studies can be read in entirety on the RQA website. Many case studies include useful materials for adaptation by other colleges and most include contact details for further information. The materials and strategies come with a health warning, however: the message of this report is that no one strategy will be successful in all contexts. Improvement is, however, likely to occur if due attention is paid to the process described in Part One of this report.

The **References section** gives details of literature on the nature and use of action research and case study methods in educational research.

Methodology

The approach to the evaluation of the 87 action research development projects is a qualitative one. An extensive literature review was undertaken; works included are listed in the **References** at the end of this report. From this review, a list of characteristics of effective action research was drawn up. The principles underlying the selection were:

- to include all characteristics which seemed to enjoy a degree of consensus
- to avoid trivial duplication by amalgamating characteristics where appropriate.

The resulting list was agreed with project managers and applied to a small group of case studies to test its validity and comprehensiveness. A slightly revised list of characteristics was then applied to the whole body of case studies. This model provides a framework for the discussion of the projects in the next section.

Data available for analysis included:

- the initial bids from each college
- consultants' reports of visits to colleges
- telephone and face-to-face interviews with a selection of project managers
- drafts and final version of case study write-ups
- the project leaders' evaluation sheets.

The Framework for Analysis

The characteristics against which each action research development project was analysed are ordered to follow the five stages of the action research process:

Analysis Stage

1. Values are made explicit.
2. There is a stated aim to make an improvement in practice.
3. Objectives are stated unambiguously.
4. Objectives are realistic and achievable.
5. There is an appropriate process of problem diagnosis.
6. There is congruence between the issues identified, the stated objectives and the actions proposed.

Planning and Preparation Stage

7. Timescales are appropriate, realistic and planned to deliver the objectives.
8. Action research is context-responsive.
9. There is a formal agreement to address the expectations of each partner.
10. Resources are allocated.
11. The action researcher is an 'insider'.
12. The process is collaborative and involves and empowers others.

Action, Monitoring, Adjusting Stage

13. An empathetic outsider is used.
14. A range of research methodologies is employed.
15. Action researchers are skilled managers of people.
16. Change happens during the process.
17. Validity is tested by taking account of critical feedback.
18. Action researchers are persistent about monitoring and collecting a variety of data and have mechanisms for monitoring progress and feeding it back .

Evaluation Stage

19. Action research can be a powerful means of professional development.
20. The researcher is self-aware and self-evaluative.
21. Successful action research leads to increased knowledge, not just successful action.
22. Outcomes are measured against objectives.
23. The unintended consequences of the intervention strategy are captured.

'Next Steps' Stage

24. Results are made public.
25. The strategies are transferable.
26. The process is cyclical.
27. The improvement strategies are sustainable.

Part One: Characteristics of Successful Action Research

What is Action Research?

> *Textbook definitions of action research are difficult to find and descriptions range from those who claim it employs the 'scientific method' to solve problems (Cohen and Manion 2000) to those who claim it is grounded in an interpretative approach: 'action research is inspired by the difficulties of understanding' (Casson and Sumara 1997:285)..*

Somekh (1995:349) suggests that it 'bridges the gap between research and practice' and 'directly addresses the knotty problem of the persistent failure of research in the social sciences to make a difference in terms of bringing about actual improvements in practice.'

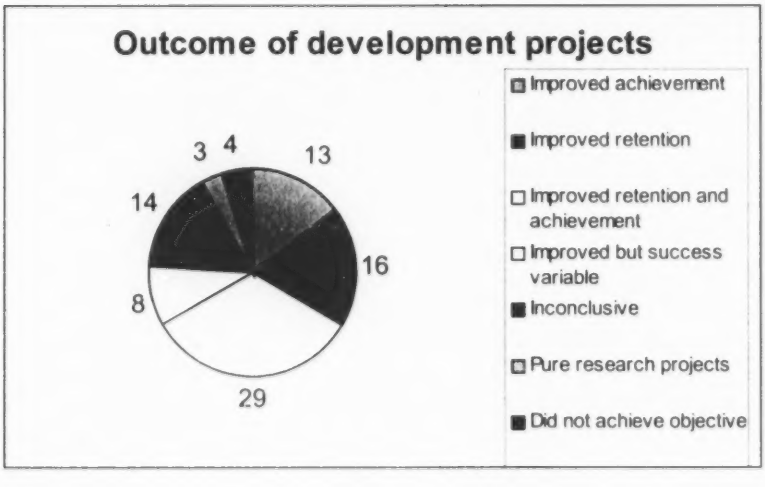
A number of proposed structures exist for the action research process: they have in common the idea of cycles or spirals of action and reflection. Cycles last for variable amounts of time, but include the following five stages:

The Stages of the Action Research Process

1. problem identification/analysis
2. planning and preparation
3. action, monitoring, adjusting
4. reflection and evaluation
5. further action. The cycle begins again, in a process of continually improving understanding and practice.

Does it Work?

The great majority of the RQA action research development projects succeeded in their objectives of improving student outcomes, as shown in the pie chart below.



Note: figures refer to number of projects in each category

Of the 87 projects under review here, three-quarters (66 projects in total) achieved their objectives. Within this group, there were eight projects that mainly succeeded, although success was variable across different programmes. Four colleges failed to achieve their objectives and retention or achievement actually deteriorated.

Quite a large number of projects (14 colleges or 16% of the total) were inconclusive. Occasionally this was due to unclear or inconsistent data provided by the college. Usually this was because the project had started late and was unable to demonstrate an improvement to student outcomes within the limited timescale available. A small number of projects (three in total) were accepted as pure research projects in order to explore significant issues such as the impact of Educational Maintenance Allowances at college level.

Of the 87 projects, therefore, 76% achieved improvements in retention, achievement or both. If the three pure research projects and the 14 inconclusive projects are excluded from the calculation, the proportion of successful projects increases to 94%. Many of the improvements were significant.

Student retention improved on 22 courses, at rates of 7% to 71% and progression improved to 76%.

Grimsby

Retention improved by 3% to 82%, achievement by 3% to 91% and we gained a Grade 1 in the FEFC inspection.

Havant

Full-time applications increased significantly (from 4044 in 1999/00 to 5636 in 2000/01).

Leicester

What Makes Action Research Successful?

The following characteristics correlate with a high degree of success. They are organised in line with the five stages of the action research process.

At the Analysis Stage:

1. Values are made explicit

Lomax (1994) asserts that an action research project is grounded in the values of those carrying it out, and that the cyclical nature of the process leads to reflection on those values during the process. It is clear from the case studies that there is no tension between the values underlying the Standards Fund, which sponsors these projects, and the values of the practitioners undertaking them. The main objectives of the Standards Fund are to support attempts to raise standards of attainment and the main aim of the action research development projects is to improve student outcomes. It appears from the case study write-ups and from interviews that there is strong support in the sector for the vision of a post-16 learning entitlement for all:

In line with the desire to widen participation and address issues of social exclusion, Eastleigh College and the Careers Service have sought a more proactive working relationship to support Year 11 progression.

Eastleigh

Some projects appeared motivated by external pressures, such as inspection:

In view of the high priority given to retention and achievement by the FEFC, the college decided to employ three student liaison officers to focus on this issue.

Norwich City College of Further and Higher Education

However, this coexisted with a strong commitment to the individual learner:

Only the patience, tolerance and forbearance of the lecturers and the hours of encouragement given by the nurse and the student liaison officer enabled this student to achieve. Overcoming years of failure, neglect and a negative self-image is extremely difficult. Encouragement and education can help someone to transcend their difficulties.

Norwich City College of Further and Higher Education

Where the values are not made clear in the case study, they nevertheless appeared to be strongly felt:

Values were assumed and implicit, not explicit. However, the team were very committed and value-driven – very student-centred.

Consultant

The desire to raise standards can be seen across all types and levels of provision. While many of the projects focused on improving the performance of low achievers, a significant minority began from a baseline of high achievement:

This project addressed achievement and on-programme retention issues related to a specific target group – the most able students.

Priestley Sixth Form and Community College

Developing a culture of continued improvement is difficult in a relatively successful organisation, which is presently oversubscribed.

Palmer's

Occasionally, in the initial stages of the project, there was a clash of values. This can be difficult to detect if the values underpinning the project are not made explicit by those designing it. One result can be staff resistance to an intended improvement strategy. An example comes from the Priestley case study:

There was some staff opposition to what was viewed as an 'elitist' group. As part of the staff briefing, it was explained that this is additional support being given to a specific group of students, and as such it is no different from identifying weaker students and tailoring a programme to meet their needs. The head of faculty spent time on a one-to-one basis, talking through the project with members of staff who showed the most concern or objection.

Priestley Sixth Form and Community College

The willingness of the manager here to work with the clash of values enabled the project to succeed; it was made possible by the open identification of the clash of values early in the project.

2. There is a stated aim to make an improvement in practice

Unlike 'pure' and even 'applied' research, the primary aim of action research is to affect the real world, not just to gain a deeper understanding of it. Virtually all the projects focused upon an aspect of provision which the college wanted to change for the better. Proposals were accepted on the basis of their potential to bring about improvements in practice.

In addition, three proposals for pure research projects were accepted on issues central to the agenda of the Raising Standards programme. An example is the Greenhead project on use of value-added measures for A-level students.

3. Objectives are stated unambiguously

All the successful projects carried a clear statement of objectives in terms of improved retention and/or achievement rates.

The aims of the project were:

- *to increase the number of students who achieve A-level General Studies*
- *to raise the pass rate in A-level General Studies*
- *to raise the proportion of higher grades*
- *to increase the UCAS points per student.*

Franklin

The success of the Franklin project stemmed in part from a tight focus on clearly stated objectives.

A significant number of projects had objectives stated in terms of targets:

To raise the retention rate in the languages section by 5% from 60% to 65% for 1999/00 and to raise the participation in accreditation by 5% for 1999/00.

Richmond Adult Community College

Many colleges advise future action researchers to note this requirement:

Try to be explicit in [terms of] objectives and to identify precisely the data inputs required.

Richmond upon Thames

Where objectives were vague and focused more on processes than outcomes, success was usually reported in terms of improvements to systems and processes, but the case study often lacks clarity regarding the impact on student outcomes, or reports no positive impact. Such process improvement may, however, lead to longer-term effects on retention and achievement rates and evaluation of the success of such projects will need a longer timescale.

The majority of projects able to report immediate improvements as well as to suggest longer-term benefits had clear and unambiguous objectives focused on student outcomes.

4. Objectives are realistic and achievable

Elliott (1991) suggests that a common cause of failure in action research projects is the tendency for action researchers in education to be overambitious and unrealistic. While most colleges stated their objectives in terms that were clear, realistic and achievable, several suffered from the weakness noted by Elliott and advise future action researchers to focus the scope of their project more tightly. It is interesting to note that not all projects that started with overambitious aims and objectives were failures: colleges that tightly monitored their projects quickly realised the problem and addressed it. The cyclical nature of the action research process enabled them to revisit the objectives and refocus the project:

The project indicated that course problems were associated with early leavers having a false sense of security or needing more realism as to how well they were managing their course. This led to a change of focus for the project from the particular contingent of Level 3 early leavers to our college-wide monitoring and support systems.

Henley-on-Thames

The main aspects of unrealistic objective setting are time and scope:

Overambition in terms of the scope of the project, and an over-optimism in terms of the timing were two key factors which affected the life of the project. ... Small steps, well done, are more useful and ultimately less frustrating.

Furness

Links are made between the effectiveness of the objective-setting stage and the effectiveness of the evaluation:

We were overambitious with the range of strategies given the time and staff allocation. ... Trying to do so many different things at once makes it difficult to progress any one of them, and even more difficult to evaluate their impact.

Tamworth and Lichfield

A smaller target group and a longer timescale would make it easier to assess the impact of specific strategies.

Enfield

Expectations can also be unrealistic concerning the skills, knowledge or understanding required to implement the strategy, either on the part of the teachers concerned, or the students:

The students found it very difficult to identify specific courses of action that would have a positive effect on their learning. The learner/teacher action plan was meant to identify agreed actions on the part of the learner and on the part of the teacher.Penwith

The important characteristic in these cases was adequate monitoring in line with the cycle of action and reflection, to identify changes needed quickly. The projects with the greatest impact on student outcomes, however, seemed to have fully analysed the issues before implementing a strategy through a careful process of problem diagnosis.

5. There is an appropriate process of problem diagnosis

One of the characteristics that correlates most closely with successful action research outcomes is the effective diagnosis of the problem prior to implementation of the strategy. An important consideration is the timing of the project, to allow adequate problem diagnosis before decisions are made about appropriate strategies and means of implementation.

The timing allowed the student liaison officers to liaise with academic staff in their linked curriculum centres before the end of term. The results of that liaison and research were taken forward and developed over the summer so that strategies would be in place at the beginning of the new academic year.

Norwich City College of Further and Higher Education

Colleges used a variety of methods to identify the nature of the issue. Many identified the issues from rigorous internal quality assurance procedures, such as the College Self-Assessment Report or Team Performance Reviews:

For several years, the college has been formally reviewing courses with unsatisfactory retention (less than 70%). During these reviews a common theme emerged which was the need for additional student support. In August 1999, the College Executive decided to fund a model whereby the college would invest in four new support posts – student support advisors. The appointments were made in July [2000] and a comprehensive training programme followed to equip them with the knowledge to undertake their roles.

Grimsby

This highly successful project shows how appropriate diagnosis, timing and identification of staff development needs can have a dramatic impact on student outcomes within a short timescale. Twenty-two of the twenty-seven courses in this project reported improvements to student retention rates ranging from 7% to 71% in a single academic year. Of the students receiving support, 71.5% were successful in

achieving their learning outcomes, against an overall college achievement rate of 69%. Given that these were students identified as 'at risk', this figure is remarkable. A further measure of success is the fact that 76% of these students progressed to further courses within the college and of the remainder, 50% obtained employment.

In aiming to identify issues, others sought the perceptions of those closest to the delivery of provision:

The college identified that tutors felt there were substantial numbers of students at risk of failure, whose additional support needs had not become apparent until later in the course, when the college's original provision had been allocated.

Hackney Community College

The use of pilot studies or internal research projects to diagnose the issues were given as examples from some successful projects:

Our Round 2 case study was preceded by an internal research project which focused on full-time student retention and achievement using the results of our internal inspections and performance reviews together with published reports such as 9000 Voices, Non-Completion of GNVQs *and* The National Retention Survey Report *to inform and direct our priorities.*

Trowbridge

Background reading to inform the research appears to help colleges to gain a clearer picture of their own issues.

A literature search on student attendance was carried out. Particularly useful publications included: Improving Student Retention: a Guide to Successful Strategies *by Paul Martinez and the Association of Colleges' Quality Information Pack on improving student attendance and punctuality.*

West Herts

The initial RQA seminar provides a brief introduction to the theory and practice of action research and specific guidance is provided by the LSDA consultant. Many colleges made use of the RQA website. Several projects (eg Huntingdonshire Regional College, Croydon) attached a bibliography of relevant reading to their case study write-ups.

The importance of careful problem diagnosis is underlined by the correlation between the absence of an adequate problem diagnosis and the failure to improve retention and/or achievement rates. Unsuccessful projects seem to have rushed or ignored the problem diagnosis phase.

The results, particularly in A-level IT, were disappointing. A key issue to emerge was that of student motivation and its link to effective pre-course guidance and induction, neither of which could be covered in this study.

Penwith

There is little evidence that the loyalty bonus encouraged better attendance or [motivated] students to keep up to date with their work. The retention rate did not improve significantly during 1999/2000 and many students did not consider the loyalty bonus as a significant factor in their motivation. ...The college acknowledges that the major route to improved retention and achievement is through the development of classroom delivery that interests and motivates the student.

Basildon

Basildon, like many other colleges, had addressed the problem of student retention with a student support strategy. During the course of the project, further investigation suggested that the area causing most student dissatisfaction was the experience in the classroom. The important point here is that a student support strategy will not solve a curriculum design and delivery problem. It is therefore essential to be clear before a strategy is chosen where the nature of the problem lies. This is not always easily identified. The action research process did, for this college, help to unravel the complex inter-relationship between the two areas, and assist the college to move on to find more appropriate strategies. It is an example of how a strategy which has a positive impact on student outcomes in one context may be ineffectual or even counterproductive in another.

The relationship between the areas of teaching/learning and curriculum design on the one hand, and student support on the other, is explored further in the next section.

6. There is congruence between the issues identified, the stated objectives and the actions proposed

Of the 87 projects from the Round 2 programme which have been evaluated as part of this report, 43 projects may be classed as student support topics, and 17 as curriculum design and delivery topics. Seventeen projects adopted both student support and curriculum design/delivery strategies. Of the remaining 10, six were more research than action research projects, and four focused on staff development. A significant number (eg Tamworth and Lichfield, South Nottinghamshire, Salisbury, Barnet) began as student support topics but became focused, through the action research process, on the quality of the student experience in the classroom.

It appears from this sample that the most common approach adopted by colleges to address poor retention rates is to provide additional student support. One recurring strategy is the identification and subsequent additional support of students categorised as 'at risk'. Several colleges have developed materials for use in identifying such students (eg Accrington and Rossendale, Eastleigh, Palmer's, Sir George Monoux, Bolton, Hackney Community College, Halton, Leicester). The 'problem' with such an approach is that it is often located within the context of a drive to widen participation: teachers may adopt a 'deficit' model of the student, who is seen as lacking the skills necessary for success on the course.

Some colleges have addressed this with support which is personal (counselling, financial support); others have provided support to develop the student's basic skills by providing additional learning support, study skills development or key skills enhancement. A distinction can be made between support provided in the classroom

(eg Leeds College of Technology, Askham Bryan) and that provided through a centre (eg Palmer's). Where the support was provided in the classroom, issues of lack of differentiation in lesson delivery and the need for greater teacher awareness of the needs of the student were identified. The strategy of placing support in class allowed the support worker to provide useful feedback to the teacher, where relationships were strong enough to allow this. The number of projects which began by employing a student support strategy, but became focused on curriculum design and delivery issues is significant:

The motor vehicle maintenance course made extensive use of additional support with a range of basic and study skills [whose lack] t had been identified as a major causal factor in poor retention and achievement in 1998/9. However, it is now clear that a wider range of tactics needs to be adopted and the project has led to a review of the curriculum, with a new qualification being offered for 2000/01. This is linked to an identified need for project work, more work experience for the students and improved resources. ... [there are] also implications for the teaching and learning strategies used and for further research on strategies linked to the particular cohort.

Chichester College of Arts, Science and Technology

Attendance monitoring is another strategy to address retention issues which recurs in the Round 2 case studies. Again, the improved monitoring led in some cases to insights which suggest issues relating to curriculum delivery rather than student support:

On the art and design programme particularly, a number of adjustments were made to teaching and learning styles in response to issues raised by the monitoring scheme when it was noticed that students were 'dipping out' of certain modules.

Barnet

Students' comments in this study bear out the college inspection findings regarding the need for more interesting lesson content.

West Herts

It might be supposed that adequate attention to problem diagnosis (characteristic 5) would lead to a suitable choice of strategy, so that student support strategies would address student support needs and interventions in teaching and learning would address issues of curriculum delivery. However, it appears from the experience of the colleges in the Round 2 programme that the inter-relationship between student and teacher performance is indeed complex, and that issues of teacher performance management need to be handled sensitively if real change is to be effected:

The key to success is handling staff perceptions of underperformance, particularly where a member of staff is not part of a course team but has a single responsibility for the subject of [the] course.

Weston

At Weston, the success of the intervention depended on building a 'no blame' culture, which enabled all concerned to explore issues and solutions openly.

At the Analysis Stage: Key Points

- At the analysis stage, giving time and energy to diagnosing the relevant issues is critical.
- Almost all of the action research projects were underpinned by shared views and values concerning the importance of improving learner outcomes.
- Interventions in the real world to effect such improvements were the focus of all but three of the projects.
- Clear objectives were associated with greater and more readily demonstrable success.
- The importance of realistic and achievable objectives is emphasised by the number of colleges which had to refine them as their project developed.
- Colleges seem to be less skilful in problem diagnosis than in many other aspects of the action research process.
- In particular, a number of projects which initially defined their issues as learner-related and their strategies in terms of student or learning support, subsequently reformulated the problems that they needed to address around teaching and curriculum issues.
- Problem diagnosis is a skilful and demanding aspect of action research which can be particularly difficult in 'defensive' cultures.
- Inadequate or partial diagnosis can be remedied as long as rigorous attention is paid to the action, monitoring and adjustingphase of action research.

At the Planning and Preparation Stage:

7. Timescales are appropriate, realistic and planned to deliver the objectives

Colleges urge that planning ought to take into account the academic year, the experience of students and the needs of staff:

The project must start at induction.

Hugh Baird

Where actions were not in place at the start of the academic year, problems were experienced:

The project was run in the second term. By that time, the Business 2 group had already settled into patterns of non-attendance/disruption, lateness and under-achievement.

Croydon

It meant the amount of time available for appointing and training the attendance workers was limited, as was the opportunity to fully brief and involve lecturers and thus allow them the opportunity to have ownership of the project.

Hastings

To enable actions to begin at the start of the academic year, time for analysis and any identified staff training should be planned well in advance. Colleges which did not devote time to research in the analysis stage have identified this as something they would do differently next time:

The only change would be to set aside more time – especially to research/read around the projects already on the website.

Norwich City College of Further and Higher Education

The need to allocate adequate time to the implementation phase of the project was also frequently cited as a learning point:

I would make a claim for remission in order to provide at least some time to ease the pressure on workload.

Southgate

Release people from teaching to participate – plan project meetings well in advance.

Tamworth and Lichfield

8. Action Research is Context-Responsive

Lomax (1994) suggests that action research is a powerful form of research because it responds to the tensions and constraints of the institution and can work within the parameters which define professionalism.

While each bid received from a college was written to a set format and the outcome was prescribed as intended improvements to retention and/or achievement rates, the project focus and choice of strategy was left to the institution. The lead manager of the project was internal to the college and the 'action' took place in the college.

Many projects describe their responsiveness to local contexts. For example, one college operating in an area of low unemployment, where students often left to take up paid work, improved retention from a low baseline of 42% to 50% by drastically redesigning the curriculum:

The three-day timetable was seen as a definite asset by the students who all took advantage of being able to earn money at the same time as study.

Huntingdonshire Regional College

Many colleges were concerned to respond to the needs of individual student cohorts, particularly in the context of widening participation:

Tutors felt they did not have sufficient training to be able to deal effectively with the behaviour that many of our students were beginning to display.

Lancaster and Morecambe College

The context for some colleges was one of financial hardship for students:

The introduction of increased Access Funds in 1999/00 available to all post-16 students followed a year of particular financial difficulty for low-income students in the area. After a period of diminishing financial support for FE, the LEA introduced a policy of no discretionary awards from 1998/9.

Exeter

Financial constraints in colleges often had a direct impact on delivery of the curriculum or support services:

It has been recognised recently that, with a reduced cohort of full-time staff and an

increased number of students, the college's tutorial system is under strain.

Havant

Since the college became incorporate in 1993, teachers have taught more hours in the classroom each week. Currently, teachers need to manage the learning of more students on more courses and in many areas the actual class size has increased. Although teaching staff aim to monitor and evaluate the progress and attendance of all their students, the need to have a group of staff who would work across college to support teachers in monitoring students was identified.

Preston

These colleges took a proactive approach to such contextual constraints. Each college used the action research process to find and implement innovative solutions to address their individual needs, and to improve the service offered to their students, working creatively with colleagues to explore issues and solutions.

Many of the projects were responding to the needs of non-traditional learners in post-compulsory education. This presents particular challenges for the colleges concerned, many of which are operating in Educational Action Zones. Nine per cent of the projects focused on improving already high performance, which presents a different, but equally demanding challenge (eg Havant, Cirencester and New College Swindon).

9. There is a formal agreement to address the expectations of each partner

Somekh (1995) discusses the ethical issues raised in investigating one's own practice and that of colleagues.

There is little evidence from the case studies of this programme that such issues are addressed directly. Few report that job/role descriptions were negotiated between all parties and formally drawn up. Rather, the relationships appeared to evolve as the project progressed, and the journey was not always an easy one:

Some teaching staff were reluctant to share the information and subsequent monitoring, as they perceived this to be an essential part of their role in the learning process.

Preston

Relationships with academic staff have improved in year two [of the project] as a result of greater integration and clearer understanding of roles. However, managers could have done more initially to explain to academic staff the different job roles.

Stamford

As well as introducing new roles, some projects brought about changes to existing roles, which meant that perceptions and the possible conflict of values had to be carefully managed:

The college does not believe it is the main role of the tutor to provide personal support, something that has caused conflict with some tutors who see this as the main focus of the tutors' role.

Northampton

The success of the initiative seems often to depend upon the personal qualities of the staff involved:

Initially staff had some negative views and had concerns about the de-skilling of the lecturer role and the undermining of their professionalism. These feelings seem to have disappeared as staff have found that the role is supportive. However, it is crucial that the person appointed to a role like this has excellent interpersonal skills and is sensitive to any possible issues with teaching staff.

Havering

Many colleges reported an easing of tensions as the project progressed:

The student liaison officers see great potential in their role. The boundaries between SLOs, tutors and teaching staff are more clearly understood than at the start of the project. Obviously there are sensitive areas, but teaching staff are experienced and professional and understand that SLOs are assisting with the tutorial role.

Norwich City College of Further and Higher Education

Where the expectations of those involved are managed at the planning and preparation stage, there are positive benefits. An example of successful practice here is the Milton Keynes project, where the student support worker met the students involved before the start of the project to explain the scheme.

One element of managing expectations could involve staff development:

The process was reviewed almost from its inception and key words had to be defined or changed. The term 'predicted grade' had to be changed to 'target grade' because of confusion with the system used for UCAS predictions. Also, subject staff were not trained in how to present the information to students, and there was a fear after the first review that students who were told about low grades might leave college.

Eccles

Failure at this early stage to fully address issues such as role definitions, relationships with other colleagues and time allocation can have a negative impact on the success of the project:

The liaison/monitoring role proved to be demanding, especially for the discrete provision, and conflicted with other duties.

Croydon

10. Resources are allocated

Each college received £2500 from LSDA for involvement in the programme, part on acceptance of the bid and part on completion of the case study. The amount was seen as useful, but in many cases, by no means covered the costs of the resources dedicated to the project, mainly staff time and in some instances, the appointment of additional support workers. For some colleges, this investment was substantial:

Three members of staff were seconded as full-time student liaison officers for the pilot project. It was recognised by the college that in order to be more effective, additional staff were needed. Three further full-time posts were appointed at the end of the pilot year.

Norwich City College of Further and Higher Education

In many colleges, the main source of additional revenue came from the increased funding from improved student retention and achievement, and some colleges designed the project with this in mind:

The project was to be cost-effective through generation of additional funding units, and therefore the levels of support were designed to meet student need while triggering appropriate additional learning support bands.

Hackney Community College

Increased units gained from increased retention and progression resulted in the appointment of one more student support assistant at the end of the year.

Grimsby

The most significant resource, and one which was frequently underestimated, was that of the project manager's time, or the time of colleagues. When asked what they would do differently in the light of experience, project managers frequently cited this area:

Ideally, I would like more resources so that more colleagues in the college could work with me.

West Herts

Problems with cash resources were rarely cited:

The only problem I've had is getting money.

West Cumbria

However, additional resources do not always seem to be essential for success:

Our context has meant that no *extraordinary funds were made available by our college management to effect any of the strategies, so we had to choose strategies which were essentially low-cost and sustainable.*

Bridgewater

11. The action researcher is an 'insider'

Many writers on action research methodology state the necessity for the actionresearcher to be an 'insider', to be involved in the situation and to be in control of the process. The design of the RQA Programme ensured that this characteristic was met by all colleges involved: the bids were drawn up by the college, to focus on an aspect of provision that the college was concerned to improve. The lead manager of the project was internal to the college. The 'action' took place in the college, was context-specific and relevant to the individuals involved.

Within the individual college, it appears that the need for those involved to feel in control of the action may also be important for success:

For support to work, it is important that the curriculum area should 'own' the planning of support based on their own informed identification of needs. Support that is 'applied' without consultation and collaboration may be seen as intrusive by both staff and students.

Leeds College of Technology

Some writers describe this characteristic as 'ownership', which may be achieved or fostered through the sort of collaborative approaches discussed in the next section.

12. The process is collaborative and involves and empowers others

One of the values most strongly articulated in the literature on action research is the value of democracy, of valuing the contribution of each participant: 'the process of action research is a social one – it requires collaboration and community' (Casson and Sumara 1997:289).

It is an important characteristic, which underpins all the stages. We have already seen comments by colleges on the need to ensure active participation by all those involved in the analysis, planning and action stages.

The 'community' of the action researchers at the macro level might be seen as the national community of colleges participating in the programme. One of the frequently cited attractions of participation in the RQA Programme was the desire to be involved in a national improvement programme. Each college had the opportunity to network with other participating colleges at a series of seminars held at stages throughout the year. Most project managers attended and reported satisfaction with the events, particularly appreciating the opportunity to share progress and concerns at the interim seminar. One project participant said:

I enjoyed meeting colleagues and sharing their enthusiasm for their projects ... sometimes it can feel a bit lonely plugging away in one's own college and meeting up at FEDA can give one a boost.

The programme was designed to give colleges the appropriate balance of autonomy and support. The role of the consultant is vital and will be discussed fully in the next section. The point here is that the consultant's role was seen as flexible and responsive. To ensure college ownership and empowerment, a balance had to be struck between monitoring, supporting and advising.

The consultant modified the support to be more appropriate to our needs. She was flexible and this is appropriate.

Rotherham College of Arts andTechnology

[The consultant] provided exactly the right balance of support versus letting me get on with it.

Grimsby

At the level of the overall project, therefore, the relationship between LSDA, as represented by the consultant, and the projects seems to have been reasonably collaborative.

At the individual college level, a variety of approaches are reported, from top-down projects led by senior management to bottom-up team-driven projects. The degree of collaboration and empowerment varies widely, usually in line with college culture. In some case studies, and contrary to expectations, a strongly directive approach appears to be associated with significant improvements to student outcomes. In many Round 2 case studies, however, engaging the participation of colleagues in the project seems to be an important success factor:

Collaboration across the curriculum has been a very positive outcome of this project and has directly resulted in these extended curricular stepping-stones.

Tamworth and Lichfield

Lengthy discussion with all the course team and other concerned parties is very important. In this way, a complete picture of the course provision and problem areas becomes available....

Lancaster and Morecambe

There does appear to be a correlation between the characteristics of empowerment and ownership, and eventual outcomes. This is made clear by colleges which adopted the same improvement strategy across different courses, with variable results:

These rates of improvement did seem to mirror the extent to which the process was embraced by their respective areas.

Hastings

Although the outcomes of the project were variable across the range of courses, it provided a number of learning points. Some of these show strategies that have not worked. Where the strategy worked best was where the course team was actively involved in the process (the First Diploma in caring).

Chichester College of Arts, Science and Technology

Again, it is important to devote adequate time to this process:

Time is essential for the course team to consider exactly how improvements can be made and to decide priorities and the best methods to tackle problem areas.

Lancaster and Morecambe

Failure to devote adequate time to this aspect of the management of the process, or falling into the trap of equating 'participation' with 'ownership' appears to correlate with negative or inconclusive results.

The key learning point for this project is to involve more staff who will be delivering the service from an early stage. For a number of reasons, it was staff who operate at a more strategic level who drove the project forward. While this is welcome in terms of support from high-level staff, it is also a barrier to ownership of activities if more

operational staff are excluded at the planning stage.

Furness

A number of colleges formed a working group or party to oversee the project. Where this worked particularly well, the group was formed during the planning stage:

The first year of the new system, in general, was a considerable success. Much of this success was due to the consultation, planning and preparation for its introduction. The role of the working party in reviewing and making recommendations was a vital one.

Havant

Havant reports the outcomes of its action research development project as: improved student retention compared to the previous year (79% to 82%); increases in student achievement (88% to 91%); and a positive FEFC inspection, which assessed student support as a Grade 1. This case study provides a useful example of implementing an improvement strategy across the whole college, and emphasises how the collaborative aspect of the process continued throughout the different stages of the project:

The success of the group depended on effective chairmanship, on commitment to finding a workable system and a wide representation of interests. This ensured a large measure of support from staff for the introduction of new provision.

Havant

At the Planning and Preparation Stage: Key Points

- In the time-constrained world of education, it is particularly important to plan quickly *and* effectively.
- The action research approach seems to be particularly well suited to the needs of educational institutions that are trying to find and implement improvement strategies.
- It is important to define roles, identify significant relationships, create an appropriate action plan and establish timescales at the planning stage.

- It is possible, however, to address any limitations at the planning stage by making adjustments in the light of experience from the ongoing project.
- The amount of money available to support these projects was small; many were quite ambitious and most succeeded. This is not an argument in favour of parsimony, but it indicates the importance of aligning development projects with the improvement priorities of educational institutions.
- In action research in educational settings, two sorts of collaboration or involvement seem to be particularly critical: 'horizontal' and 'vertical'.
- The 'horizontal' relationship implies joint working between relevant functions: teachers (on the same team and between teams), guidance, student support, learning support and other staff.
- Within the limited timescale of this evaluation, evidence concerning 'vertical' collaboration is more equivocal. Projects at both ends of the top-down and bottom-up spectrum were successful. Partial or variable success in some colleges seems to be associated with a lack of urgency or leadership on the part of key managers.

At the Action, Monitoring, Adjusting Stage:

13. An empathetic outsider is used

Somekh (1995:341) suggests that an empathetic outsider is an invaluable resource, 'to redress the poor control we have over our own actions and our lack of consciousness of this'. Each college was assigned a consultant by LSDA, and the satisfaction ratings for this aspect of the experience were particularly high (on a scale of 1–5 where 1 is an indicator of the highest satisfaction and 5 the lowest, 28 out of 42 returns scored 1; eight scored 2; and six scored 3). Almost all of the respondents who returned end-of-project evaluation sheets were complimentary about their consultants, who stayed with the college from the start to completion of the project:

The support, advice and guidance of the consultant were excellent.

Askham Bryan

[The consultant] was encouraging and helpful and boosted my confidence in the case study when I was floundering at the end.

North Tyneside

[The consultant] could not have been more helpful, patient and accommodating.

Milton Keynes

[The consultant] kept us to task and was invaluable in keeping the momentum going.

Exeter

Most colleges saw the role of the consultant primarily as one of support. Particular qualities expected of the consultants included flexibility of approach (to fit with the college context and the experience of the college coordinator) and a high level of expertise and experience in quality improvement and change management.

Activities undertaken by the consultant varied according to college need and included:

- visiting the college at the start and towards the middle of the project
- being available by telephone to discuss issues, provide a supportive ear, provide practical advice and information
- providing a sounding board for new ideas/approaches
- giving guidance on research methods and techniques, including data collection and analysis
- attending meetings of the project team
- interviewing students and teachers and providing objective feedback
- providing information about other colleges engaged in similar development work and/or contacts with them
- monitoring and encouraging progress when the project is floundering
- boosting confidence and keeping the momentum going
- organising a network meeting of colleges
- providing feedback on the first draft of case studies.

14. A range of research methodologies is employed

Most writers agree that a strength of the action research process is its flexibility in terms of methods. [Wilson in Bell *et al*] (1984) suggests that the strengths of one method may offset the weakness of another, so that an investigation which uses a range of methodologies may be stronger than one which adopts a single approach. It is evident from the case studies from the Round 2 programme that colleges draw on a wealth of methodological approaches. Practicality, in terms of resources available and individual contexts, takes precedence over the need to be faithful to a particular theoretical approach.

Somekh (1995:340) relates this characteristic to the underlying values of the action research process:

'this is the right and proper consequence of action research being grounded in the values of the individuals carrying it out; underpinning action research there is a set of democratic values which endow the action researcher with the right to take control of the research process and make decisions about the full range of methodological issues on the basis of a careful judgement and contextual knowledge.'

There was a wide variation in the research experience of the project managers in the colleges. Some had doctorates or master's degrees. Others were carrying out the project as part of a higher degree.

Many, however, were new to research. One of the aims of the programme is to build research capacity in the FE sector, and no project appeared to suffer from being led by a relatively inexperienced researcher. The consultant served as a resource with whom to discuss a range of research methods, from problem analysis to data collection and evaluation. This was quoted as one of the main benefits of the experience by one college:

...a consultant with a wide range of experience in project work and valuable knowledge to help make links with other work.

York

Colleges were aware of the need for data to be reliable and valid. One college used the consultant as an external source of data collection:

Feedback received through consultant interviews with staff and students was very valuable. We would like more of this objective assessment.

Enfield

Another used a college inspector as a source of validation:

Perception was monitored by informal discussion, interviews with students, feedback

from parents and tutors and the college inspector who spoke to the students and tutors.

Grimsby

Many colleges gathered perception data and it is worth noting the extent to which perceptions of staff, students, parents and others are considered to be important indicators of success or failure:

As part of the project, student support staff collected the views of students and staff via written questionnaire, telephone questionnaire and interview. The responses, linked with [student] qualifications and career [aims], indicate how strong these are as motivating factors. Interest in learning also featured strongly.

Leeds College of Technology

The case studies evidence the awareness of action researchers in college that a variety of means of data collection is important to ensure validity of results:

As a result of the various research exercises, interviews with staff and interaction with students, the student liaison officers have developed a greater understanding of the difficulties faced by students.

Norwich City College of Further and Higher Education

Colleges showed some sensitivity to the possible weaknesses of the data collected and the instruments used:

Project members should not be swayed too heavily by anecdotal evidence; data should not be taken at face value; instead its veracity ought to be based on a transparent audit trail.

Trowbridge

Some colleges drew on published research as a starting point for a research framework or tools: the project on mastery learning by Worcester College of Technology is an example:

We used the work of Black and Wiliam (1998) and Petty (1998) which contrasted the conventional practice of measure, criticise and move on (a talent focus) with a continual improvement focus of diagnose, remediate and praise.

Another source of diversity in method was provided by other national improvement initiatives:

I drew on materials in the Inclusive Learning Quality Initiative resource pack to help shape open-ended questions which maintained a focus on the subject of my research – preferred learning styles, explicit reflective learning approaches and action planning. A final question about comparisons between experience at college and experience at school was included as a possible validation check on perceptions.

Capel Manor

In writing up the case study, colleges were also quite sophisticated in their use of presentational devices. Many used tables, bar charts, pie charts or scatter graphs to give a clear and visual representation of their data. Several colleges used anonymised student case studies which convey most effectively the reality of the students' lives, including reasons for previous disengagement from the educational system, and bear powerful testimony to the success of the support provided.

15. Action researchers are skilled managers of people

The skills demonstrated by the college action researchers extend beyond the acquisition of expertise in data handling and presentation. The management of the action research, as suggested by Casson and Sumara (1997), demands more of the researcher than just the application of research methods. It is a skilled process requiring the ability to uncover, interpret and facilitate an ongoing process of social change that is as much to do with relations between people as the application of skills.

The most successful projects acknowledged the need to work with the anxieties of staff as they lived through the process of change inherent in the action research:

The biggest challenge to the project [with the greatest] potential for success or disaster was handling serious staff concerns.

Weston

The purpose of action research is to effect change in the real world, and the action researcher has, in the implementation phase, to manage this change. One aspect of change management is the overcoming of resistance, and several colleges showed an awareness of the need to overcome initial scepticism:

Initially, this created a small amount of friction. However, this was overcome through the particular skills of the project leader. By involving the IT lecturers in identifying the issues and possible solutions, the initial barriers were broken down.

Kensington and Chelsea

One skill necessary for successful management of the action research process is the ability to manage change. Attention to staff needs and morale, partly covered in the sections above on values, expectations and empowerment, is essential for the change to be sustainable. Change is resisted more strongly where it is perceived as a threat to values and beliefs, or where the staff involved are not given a degree of control:

Staff were resistant to change and in particular, there was a lot of discussion about the required points score that students needed to join a particular programme of study. This, coupled with the fact that progress was being monitored by staff external to the teaching team, meant that many teaching staff felt their professional judgement was being challenged.

Preston

Communication with all those involved is crucial for success:

The management of change requires good communication – we made assumptions about what information was being passed on without ensuring it was reaching all staff affected by the change. Admin[istrative] staff also need to be kept informed, otherwise they will not understand the underlying reasons, nor [know] to whom they should refer for help.

Stamford

Finally, the introduction of major change can require from managers a strength of purpose and a determination to hold fast to a belief in what they are doing. The Franklin case study convincingly portrays how strong and supportive leadership carried through a dramatic change to the design and teaching of the general studies curriculum, which initially met with strong resistance from both staff and students:

The decision to develop the programme was a difficult [one] ... the contemplation of assessed A-level General Studies for some staff was a major step about which they expressed real concerns.... Students were very aware of the 'imposed' demand of a further A-level. ...

The initial training was focused on general tutor skills as well as specific guidance. ... At the end of the first day, the tutors were near to revolt and an intervention by the course leader was requested. It proved to be a significant turning point... The course leader spent an hour going through copies of three scripts of differing levels and giving staff a grading exercise. Many fears were allayed...

A meeting of all students gave them the chance to air issues with personal tutors. A number of students and parents objected to the development and they had to be sensitively dealt with on a one-to-one basis.

Franklin

The dramatic improvements in student attainment (the average points score per student increased from 3.4 to 5.3 and the average ALIS (A-level Information System) residual for the whole college rose from 0.5 to 2.5) reflects the success of this project. The Franklin case study displays the characteristics of thorough problem diagnosis; innovative strategy; strong management, including listening to and working through staff and student concerns; practical support in the form of materials and staff development; and careful monitoring.

16. Change happens during the process

Two sorts of change are demonstrated in the improvement projects:

- outcome effects on retention, achievement and attainment
- formative effects where monitoring and feedback processes led to adjustments and changes to the project.

The central purpose of the Standards Fund is to support colleges in raising achievement. The great majority of the projects in this study succeeded The most successful achieved significant improvements to student outcomes within a single academic year; all (except the handful of pure research projects) report changes in processes and attitudes.

Of the 87 projects evaluated in this report, 66 (76%) successfully achieved improved outcomes in terms of better student success rates. Full details are given above at page 10.

The driving force of action research is the practitioners' desire to initiate change in the real world. Unlike 'pure' research, the primary aim of action research is to bring about change, to affect the real world, not just to gain a deeper understanding of it. Somekh (1995) describes the nature of the process as 'transformational'. Comments made by those involved in the Round 2 action research development projects would suggest that the process has this effect. One consultant said: 'It certainly changed the whole ethos of one team.'

The findings in action research are acted upon immediately rather than at the end of the research process. Findings feed directly back to change actions due to the deepened understanding of the situation. The process is formative and encourages change as part of the process. This is partly a feature of the structure of action research as a cycle rather than a single intervention; it makes action research particularly suited to the needs of education and training institutions, where the desire is to make a difference to the experience of current learners.

The feedback from the admissions tutors was not encouraging. They felt that students were not willing to disclose personal information during the first interview. As a result, the checklist for tutors was redesigned in the form of a confidential questionnaire for the students to complete for themselves.

Leicester

The cyclical nature of the process meant that for some projects, the most immediate change was to the project plan, as outcomes of early action pointed to a misdiagnosis of the issue, or changes in college circumstances made amendments necessary. The flexibility of the process allowed changes of direction and the case studies provide evidence of the willingness of college staff to respond quickly to insights gained:

The agenda inevitably changed as feedback came through. For example, it was felt that wider issues of coordination and student tracking were so pressing on some programmes that it was counterproductive to deploy extra tutoring time as that marginal support could not address major structural issues. Similarly, the liaison role emerged strongly as it became increasingly apparent that specialist support was needed for some students.

Huddersfield Technical College

In some colleges, the timescale was an issue. Where the changes identified involved structural or resource questions, these could not always be effected immediately and were planned for the next academic year. In a few colleges, some of the reflection took place after completion of the project:

Follow-up sessions after completion of the write-up allowed for the exploration of staff perception and further staff development.

Askham Bryan

Being able to respond to findings quickly enough to make adjustments depends partly on the degree of attention paid to the next two characteristics: taking account of feedback and close monitoring.

17. Validity is tested by taking account of critical feedback

The successful projects were managed by people who were open to, or actively sought, critical feedback. One source of objective feedback was the LSDA consultant, who was available to give ongoing comment and suggestions for reflection:

[The consultant) was interested in the project, offered a valuable perspective, compared us with other colleges and set up a forum with other colleges so we could share good practice.

Norwich City College of Further and Higher Education

Another source of external critical feedback was the national community of researchers in the RQA Programme. Lomax (1994) talks about action research findings being validated by 'educated' witnesses from its own context. The RQA seminars allowed project managers to present their interim findings and evaluation to those in similar positions in other colleges and receive their critical feedback in a supportive environment.

Internal feedback is also quoted in the case studies as an important source of validation. Many colleges conducted internal surveys to seek staff and student perceptions of the interventions and their impact and triangulated the results. Some used the feedback to make immediate changes to the strategy:

Cross-college documentation, tutor guidelines and information were produced, which were trialled with tutors and students and refinements made in the light of feedback. This was very important, although time was short, in order to ensure that the documentation was user-friendly and useful and would enable tutors to contribute directly to the developments.

Henley Coventry

18. Action researchers are persistent about monitoring and collecting a variety of data and have mechanisms for monitoring progress and feeding it back

It has already been noted that rigorous monitoring and feedback can compensate for weaknesses in the analysis and planning stages of the project. Close attention to data and monitoring allows immediate changes to the project focus, highlights people management issues and enables formative evaluation of the strategy so that findings can be fed immediately into the improvement action. One of the most frequently occurring comments in the section of the case study reports on 'learning points' concerns adequate monitoring of the project. Comments seem to fall into one of three categories:

Data

This starts at the planning and preparation stage:

Ensure starting information is accurate, particularly statistics.

Derby Tertiary College Wilmorton

Make sure in the planning stage that you are clear about how you intend to measure the outcomes.

Leicester

The clear factual data on attendance, which could be immediately related in a meaningful rather than a speculative way (which had been the case previously) enabled clear, quick and helpful decisions to be made about the support required for any one student.

Barnet

Communication

Meetings were called frequently and recorded. This enabled progress to be checked. The use of e-mail also greatly assisted communications during the project and ensured everyone was able to keep in touch.

Rotherham College of Arts and Technology

Share ideas widely, including on an ad hoc *basis.*

Prior Pursglove

Regular inserts were placed in the College Bulletin *to keep staff informed of improvements and to help them understand the part that they played.*

Preston

Where there were communication problems, this tended to have an impact on the effectiveness of the project:

A comprehensive case study of a single department would undoubtedly have been easier to run and monitor. The logistical and communication difficulties associated with a cross-college approach accounted for a disproportionate amount of time and energy within the running of the project.

North Tyneside

Rigorous monitoring procedures

Cross-college planning documentation was used throughout the process. This reduced any confusion about presenting information and assisted in the monitoring of progress.

Rotherham College of Arts and Technology

It has raised awareness of a number of issues particularly with regard to monitoring procedures to make them more rigorous.

Eccles

Plan carefully; review progress against the plan on a regular basis.

Prior Pursglove

The importance of the active management of the project was highlighted in situations where the same strategy was applied to several courses, with marked differences in outcomes:

The particular circumstances that prevailed when the project was being run had a major influence on its success as an exercise, in that it went smoothly where day-to-day management was operating, but difficulties were experienced where normal management was suspended. It is clear that close day-to-day management or supervision is required in order to overcome personality difficulties.

Hastings

At the Action, Monitoring and Adjusting Stage: Key Points

- The role of the 'critical friend' seems to be important. Here, the role was fulfilled by a consultant. Presumably, a suitable colleague from elsewhere in the organisation or from outside could also fulfil such a role.
- Within a very short timescale, colleges developed an impressive variety of methods and techniques.
- In some cases, benefits were achieved by using approaches derived from other educational initiatives (eg on widening participation, inclusive learning, basic skills) and, indeed, by combining different initiatives within the same improvement project.
- The change aspects of action research in education imply a need for particularly good interpersonal and leadership skills on the part of project leaders.
- The importance of feedback loops, formative evaluation and close monitoring cannot be emphasised too much.

- Every college needed to make adjustments and refinements as it went along. The ability to handle this process seems to be one of the most important professional qualities of a coordinator or leader of an action research project.

At the Evaluation Stage:

19. Action research can be a powerful means of professional development

Advocates of the action research method claim that it provides for more effective professional development than more traditional forms of training, because it cuts out the transitional stage, where learned abstract theory has to be 'translated' into useful practice (Desforges 2000).

Elliott (1991:69) claims the usefulness of action research lies 'in helping people to act more intelligently and skilfully'.

In some cases, the professional development of the team was an unintended outcome of the action research. In other cases, it was planned in as a result of careful diagnosis of the needs of those involved. Whether a main or a subsidiary focus of the action, the continuing professional development of staff appears to be crucial to the success of many of the strategies introduced:

The staff development aspect of this project was key.

Kensington and Chelsea

Taken together, examples suggest that some student performance issues have more to do with the professional updating of staff skills than the perceived problems of students:

The college has identified that teachers 'forget' how learners learn and to this end, the college is now implementing staff development to update staff on teaching and learning styles.

Northampton

Some staff development was concerned with making existing systems work properly. For these colleges, addressing the lack of consistency in operating current systems was a more significant factor for success than the introduction of a new strategy:

One issue that emerged was the need to raise awareness among tutors (especially relatively new tutors) of existing policies, procedures and services.

Accrington and Rossendale

The quality of teacher–student interaction is an issue – the system is only as good as those who use it effectively (if at all). Where it was implemented conscientiously, improvements were reported.

Worcester College of Technology

For some colleges, the action research project provided a means for managers to address team underperformance. The degree to which the experience leads to personal and professional development depends partly on the extent to which the action researcher is able to show the characteristic discussed in the next section.

20. The researcher is self-aware and self-evaluative

According to Somekh (1995:348), 'Action research reports need to document some aspects, at least, of the researcher's reflection in order to establish the validity of the research.'

As a general observation, college discussion of evaluation (as distinct from the presentation of the outcome data) is less extensive than discussion of planning and implementation. It may be that evaluation activities need more support than the other activities, or that more time has to elapse for further evaluation to be effective, to allow for the generation of data and space for reflection. It may be that colleges see evaluation as unproblematic and did not therefore have many comments on this point.

To some extent, the evidence for this characteristic is difficult to gain from a study of the data available for this report. There is a section in the case study report entitled 'learning points', but this tends to be used more for practical tips for advice and recommendation than for self-reflective comments. This is reasonably appropriate for a document mainly for use by other practitioners.

This issue has implications for the ways in which case studies are evaluated and judged. Adelman *et al* (1984:99) discuss the ethical considerations in case study work: 'the case study worker acknowledges that others must live with the consequences of his findings...' and an action researcher 'knows more than he should tell'.

The paradox here is that the usefulness of a case study lies in its detail, as argued by Stake (1995:19): 'An important criterion for judging the merit of a case study is the extent to which the details are sufficient and appropriate for a teacher working in a similar situation to relate his decision making to that described in the case study.'

The readers and writers of case studies should bear these issues in mind. It is evident that project leaders in colleges were honest and objective in their presentation of the project in the case study. They were also sensitive to ethical considerations such as violation of privacy, and loyalty to colleagues and to their college. Almost all the case studies include a contact name and number and readers wishing to know more about the project will be able to follow up their reading with telephone or e-mail contacts.

An interesting link is suggested by one college between the morale of staff and their ability to be self-reflective:

The strategy had a substantial impact on staff morale where it was successful and the course reviews for these courses showed a further willingness to be self-critical.
Chichester College of Arts, Science and Technology

21. Successful action research leads to increased knowledge, not just successful action

Cohen and Mannion (2000) join with others in their claim that action research leads to increased knowledge, not just successful action, and can therefore contribute to educational theory. This report has focused on the process of action research, drawing on available literature and 87 completed case studies. In this sense, the combined messages from the large programme of action research has led to some increased knowledge concerning the application of the action research process to retention and achievement issues in colleges.

Some of the learning that has occurred relates to the nature of the improvement process. For example, one college employed a single strategy (additional learning support), across two different student cohorts, and found that where it was effective in raising outcomes on one course, the underlying issue in the other course was different. For the first course, the students did indeed have support needs arising from low levels of basic skills. In the second course, further analysis showed that the basic skills of some of the students were above the level of the course; but there was no higher-level course on offer in that vocational area. The issues were recruitment and curriculum rather than student support.

The project has brought about an improved understanding at the college of how applying a range of support strategies can affect a learning programme, its staff and students. Staff recognised that a number of factors contributed to low staying-on rates and achievement and that the efficacy of support depended on an analysis of students' needs.

Leeds College of Technology

22. Outcomes are measured against objectives

A crucial aspect of effective evaluation is to measure the impact of the strategy against the intended outcomes. If this is not done rigorously, there is no means of knowing how far the strategy has been effective. The intended outcomes for the projects in this programme were increases in student retention rates and/or achievement. For some projects, the case study write-up was completed before statistics were available, and the outcomes need to be added to the case studies on the website. For most colleges, particularly those where the project was managed rigorously and student outcomes were affected, retention and achievement data was clearly presented as 'before' and 'after' measures of effectiveness. Examples are numerous:

Figures from the additional support service show that those students who get support stay at college and achieve. Eighty-six per cent of students who received support stayed at college, and of these, 83% achieved their qualification.

Furness

Some colleges made use of tables to make clear the distance travelled:

PENWITH COLLEGE		
Examination results	**1998/99**	**1999/00**
Number of students sitting examination	26	35
Overall pass rate	54%	74%
A–C grade profile	38%	63%
ALIS average standardised residual	-1.01	0.06

Where statistics were given for more than one year, evaluation of the strategy was more effective:

The number of students taking more than three subjects in year 1 (excluding general studies) increased from 30% in 1998 to 51% in 1999.

Priestley

This is particularly the case where the college goes on to evaluate the statistics:

This was partly due to an increased awareness within the group that students of their ability should be capable of four subjects. This was promoted during the registration period and reiterated during the introduction of the project to the group.

Priestley

Many colleges usefully compared the target cohort with a control group of students:

Using 1999/00 data, when comparing two cohorts of similar students, one with a teaching support tutor and the other without, within the area of hairdressing, the group with the teaching support tutor had a retention rate of 82% and the other group one of 72%.

Preston

Some measured the outcomes against national or local benchmarks:

One key outcome was to have a much higher-than-sector average (the FEFC average was 76% based on inspections in 1999/00) for attendance. Records show that the attendance rate for students in the defined cohort (new full-time 16–18-year-old students) in 1999/00 was 87%.

Preston

Colleges seem to be careful when presenting the data not to claim undue credit for the project:

Achievement improved on both programmes: business and management from 62% to 78%; art and design from 68% to 73% (NB the extremely large jump in the business and management figures was almost certainly due to the change in the achievement figure for the RSA Secretarial Certificate, which is almost certainly due to other factors. If this is excluded, the improvement rate is 62–69%.)

Barnet

Difficulties in isolating the impact of the strategy on outcomes were acknowledged, particularly in colleges where several other improvement initiatives (eg on inclusive learning) were introduced at the same time.

We consider that the project has given an added impetus to the college's efforts in improving retention and achievements. It should be noted that not all the perceived improvement should be attributed to the work of the project. ...It should also be acknowledged that the project has complemented a number of other initiatives.

Thanet

The project interventions appeared to have made no difference to student retention, which could be more readily linked to placement factors.

Penwith

A few colleges were reluctant to measure outcomes in terms of student retention and achievement rates: the most commonly quoted reason for this was the issue of timing:

We now know much more about which students leave the college and why. This has given credibility to the new procedures developed in the light of this knowledge. In terms of outcomes, we inevitably have little hard evidence of the effects of our new strategies as they need to run for at least an academic year before we can meaningfully evaluate them.

Henley-on-Thames

In cases where no hard data was available, colleges identified other outcomes as evidence of success of the project: often these were the projects which had stated their objectives in terms of improvements to processes and procedures:

It is fair to describe the project as a success. A powerful analytical tool has been produced which the college is planning to incorporate into its quality assurance and review procedures.

Prior Pursglove

In summary, evaluation is easier if it is considered at the objective-setting stage and if care is taken to focus on targeted areas for action and well-defined strategies. To make a more general point, it was sometimes difficult to compare the impact of strategies in different colleges because of the different ways that data was reported. For this same reason, it is not really possible to calculate the overall impact of the development projects in any precise way. This issue could be addressed in the future if projects were to report their data using the same format and conventions.

23. The unintended consequences of the intervention strategy are captured

One strength of the action research method is its flexibility, which allows it to pick up unintended effects. Many colleges reported learning points or positive outcomes which were not part of the original bid or plan:

We have learned a variety of things from this project, not all related to our original objectives: small groups working together [serve as] an excellent forum to identify best practice and the staff who worked most enthusiastically on the project, and cooperated to analyse their teaching styles, made the most significant gains in terms of achievement.

Tamworth and Lichfield

Several colleges reported improvements to parental perception of the college/course:

There were positive comments from parents who were involved in relation to the business and management programme.

Barnet

Many parents were particularly impressed that the college took time in the evening to chase absentees.

Grimsby

The desire of colleagues not included in the project to share ideas and benefit immediately from the good practice they observed is noted by several colleges:

This application of the charts was unplanned and unexpected. The fact that it arose out of sharing ideas with colleagues outside the initial project group shows the benefits of ad hoc *discussion with interested colleagues.*

Prior Pursglove

Copies of the grid for identifying 'at risk' students were also requested and widely used by tutors for programmes outside the project.

Accrington and Rossendale

Many colleges reported how improvements in one area of provision had a positive impact on more than one measure of success:

An unexpected outcome was the apparent linkage of retention/achievement with recruitment. The pre-course days were intended to safeguard recruitment on courses which operate in a very competitive local environment. What was done for recruitment appears to have had a beneficial effect also on retention, with all of those who have attended a pre-course day being retained until the end of the course. Similarly, where a course manager has anticipated [that] improved college bus services [would] help his students to stay on the course, it has also had the effect of improving recruitment from that area.

Bishop Burton

Retention was not made a specific objective of this project, partly because the team felt that it is, even more than achievement, an outcome of the whole college experience by students, as well as their home/personal experiences. However, the retention rate improved from 61% to 79%. Although this appears to indicate a significant improvement in Year 1 retention rates, the 1998/99 figure was unusually low.

Penwith

This last example is one of many which suggests that the link between retention and achievement is closer than is often supposed. It reinforces the earlier point that while colleges often address the issue of retention by a student support strategy, the real areas for improvement may lie more with the student experience in the classroom. This was a common insight quoted by several colleges as an unintended result of the action research:

Although it was not envisaged when the team was set up, a large part of the team's work related to dealing with front-line quality concerns. Welfare issues aside, the most common concerns of students are with teaching- and assessment-related issues. These concerns usually relate to the quality of delivery, clustering of assignments, the insufficient amount of [teacher] input for assignments and the breakdown of relationships between a member of staff and members of a group.

Southampton

The value of the scheme goes way beyond the basic attendance statistical data in terms of identifying problems and raising issues related to teaching and learning.

Barnet

Once the first grids (of identifying 'at risk' students) were fed back to the project team, it became clear that as well as identifying students at risk, it highlighted potential problems at programme level. For example, one team returned the grid with an entire vertical column of ticks, indicating problems with missed assessment

deadlines (with the whole group). This allowed us to develop strategies at individual and programme level.

Accrington and Rossendale

In conclusion, the process of action research appears to be an effective means of enabling colleges to focus on the nature of the real issues. While only 19% of the projects employed a strategy directly related to curriculum delivery or design, a significant number of the 50% of projects which employed a student support strategy reported a shift over the course of the project towards a curriculum focus. The effects of the projects appear to extend beyond the initial objectives to influence the perceptions of staff, students and parents, and the case study format enables these effects to be captured.

At the Evaluation Stage: Key Points

- Improvement projects in the tradition of action research seem to provide a particularly rich source of professional development.
- The literature on college (as distinct from school) improvement is relatively sparse. The learning generated by these projects has made a substantial contribution to our understanding of college improvement issues.
- The projects indicate the importance of practitioner-led research. In only a couple of colleges was the project led by a member of staff with a formal research role.

- The success of colleges in measuring outcomes against objectives using a mix of hard and soft data for both formative and summative purposes, suggests that measurement is more important in action research in education than has sometimes been suggested in the literature.
- It would be helpful, in future, if colleges would present their data using the same format and conventions.
- Colleges that were unable to supply hard data on student outcomes seem to have been frustrated by problems of timescale rather than by intrinsic problems of measurement.
- The flexibility implicit in action research provides an opportunity to identify unexpected and unplanned outcomes. These included reformulated strategies, unexpected learning by participants and unanticipated changes.

At the 'Next Steps' Stage:

24. Results are made public

Winter (1989) is one of many writers to claim that an essential aspect of action research is its existence in the public domain. He describes it (162) as: 'systematic enquiry made public'. Publishing the research makes it available for others and opens it to public scrutiny. All the case studies are published on the RQA website: www.rqa.org.uk.

The results of projects were usually disseminated internally in the college. This might take the form of written briefings; presentations to training events attended by all staff; sharing of good practice between teams, either informally or by formal means such as pairing of curriculum areas:

College-wide staff development days will enable the staff to share their work. Staff enjoy sharing their successes and find it rewarding to learn from their colleagues' real experience.

North East Worcestershire

One of the most powerful means of disseminating information and achieving staff development is to use a coaching or mentoring model:

[Staff development] seems to have been most effective when providing coaching and mentoring for existing tutors.

Huddersfield Technical College

The development of the coaching model has been accepted with much encouragement. ... All eight staff who were observers and the staff whose sessions were observed were unanimous that the process was helpful, supportive and developmental. A follow-up project has been planned to develop teaching skills through lesson observations and develop [the] coaching skills of observers.

Weymouth

25. The strategies are transferable

The strategies are often quoted as being transferable, both internally and externally:

The college is planning to use the model for the FEDA project throughout college to improve retention and achievement in other schools within college.

Lancaster and Morecambe

The ideas and findings have been shared with other curriculum teams. Our own team is using the ideas to improve other programmes.

Derby Tertiary College Wilmorton

The impact of the project was very positive and resulted in a student cohort with an estimated pass expectation of 22% before the project achieving a 78% actual pass rate. The strategy could be easily transferable to other colleges with students likely to be eligible for additional learning support.

Hackney Community College

However, colleges are careful to stress the need to match the strategy to the individual college, course or student cohort:

The strategies put forward could be transferred to other colleges. However, each college and team is unique and would need to adapt the strategies to their own situation.

West Herts

26. The process is cyclical

Most of the colleges involved in the RQA development project programme intend to continue the next stage of the cycle. Having reflected on those aspects of the strategy which seem to work best, they want to address weaknesses and roll forward the improved strategy to new or different student cohorts. For many colleges, the first stage in the continuing cycle is further dissemination of findings and accompanying staff development:

The findings of the research projects and the attendant new procedures were given a high profile at the staff conference held in July in a session devoted to 'Strategies for improving retention and achievement for curriculum 2000' which was attended by all staff. A training day for personal tutors covered the practical application of the revised documentation, with a follow-up session arranged for November when individual ALIS target minimum grades are available.

Henley-on-Thames

For many colleges, the project is the beginning of a longer-term process of improvement, and is considered a valuable investment:

Although the lead-in time resulted in limited operation in 199900, the concept of the community student advisor has developed for 2000/01. Last year's 'additional job' has become this year's 'energy saver'.

Rotherham College of Arts and Technology

Colleges have realised, through their action research project, the importance of some of the characteristics of the improvement process. One example is the need to articulate and reinforce the values underpinning an initiative:

The most significant learning point was the issue of entitlement. Once this was understood to be central to student retention and achievement, the training in tutorial techniques and the planning process fell into place. All new lecturing staff are made aware of the entitlement philosophy and are guided in the provision for their students.

Kensington and Chelsea

27. The improvement strategies are sustainable

Within the limited timescales allowed for completion of the projects and the publication of this report, it is not possible to say whether the strategies will be sustainable in the long term, or will lead to long-term improvements. Those involved suggest that the process of action research has led not only to the employment of strategies, some of which may be sustainable, but also to new approaches to improvement which will have a longer-term impact.

It is not just the strategy that is carried forward into a new cycle. The approach used in the action research process as a means of quality improvement is also seen as a powerful force to apply to new areas:

The college has set up development projects for in-house research as part of its new quality and professional development approaches. Individuals and groups will be

able to bid for development/research time or be invited to join in research projects to which specific time is allotted.

North East Worcestershire

What appears to have happened in some colleges amounts to a cultural shift:

The college is undergoing a cultural change. We now have in place more focused, tighter systems for monitoring and reporting on all students. The new procedures were regarded positively in the recent college inspection when we were awarded a Grade 2 for support for students, a grade up on the previous inspection.

Henley-on-Thames

Effecting changes to staff perceptions may be a crucial element of this shift. The initial stage is to raise awareness, which some colleges have achieved by more rigorous use of objective data, target setting and/or use of internal and/or external benchmarks:

The difficulty has been in convincing poorly performing areas that it is possible to improve since their reaction has tended to be to locate the cause of the problem in the nature of the students recruited. The introduction of ALIS data to the college revealed significant differences in performance between different parts of the A-level curriculum and suggested that the difficulties did not lie purely with the students.

In this context, the RQA Programme was seen as a timely opportunity to seek out practical and realistic ways forward.

Penwith

In this context, active management of staff perceptions is crucial. It involves good communication and may involve working within existing informal power structures:

Internal marketing is as important as external marketing. External agencies have been closely involved in the development of the Achieving Together initiative, but in-house, there needs to be a college-wide awareness of what is happening. ...it is necessary to work with everyone, breaking down myths and stereotypes that can form false barriers.

Walsall College of Arts and Technology

The recognition that a shadow hierarchy exists to complement the official one was an important factor. Intense efforts were made to listen to the members of the organisation who had expert and credibility power as well as to those who were the natural and charismatic leaders. The involvement of those opinion guiders meant that the strategies evolved were couched in the terms appropriate to the organisational culture and not seen as externally imposed.

Palmer's

Other strategies for changing staff attitudes include adopting some of the characteristics described in this report, such as ensuring staff ownership of the change process, or observing the need to develop staff:

Carrying core staff with you is a crucial success factor. Providing them with opportunities through the tutor support forum to take ownership of the work, to feel valued and supported and to develop and enhance their own skills has been a major part of the positive progress achieved.

Walsall College of Arts and Technology

As noted above, the type of staff development occurring via the action research process is particularly powerful:

During the past 10 years, much staff development has moved to a short input/cascade model rather than systematic intensive work with a central curriculum development focus. This project resuscitated the model of staff development around curriculum development and change rather than 'one-off' inputs.

York

In summary, the understanding of the action research process appears to lead to the adoption of strategies that are likely to support sustainable improvement by effecting cultural change. These fundamental changes often involve the nature of the teaching and learning process. Some colleges suggest that failure to achieve such a cultural shift is a barrier to effective improvement:

[Lack of] time and the preconceived attitudes of both staff and students may obstruct the development of effective formative assessment. The quality of teacher–student

interaction is an issue – the system is only as good as those who use it. Where it was implemented conscientiously, improvements were reported.

Worcester College of Technology

The development has exposed some fundamental teaching and learning issues which will need to be addressed within some areas of the college. In particular, that of defensiveness in relation to staff's own awareness and understanding of the teaching and learning process in traditional academic curricula. With hindsight, the development model and materials were too challenging of the prevailing culture and expectations of the Sixth Form staff.

York

At the 'Next Steps' Stage: Key Points

- The public nature of the case studies does not seem to have affected the willingness of their authors to deal honestly with their experience.
- Practitioners are confident that many of their strategies and, indeed, the action research process itself can be transferred to other colleges and, by extension, to other educational institutions.
- There is every reason to suppose that models of improvement based on action research are relevant to education and training institutions generally.
- Having completed their project, a number of colleges intend to add further stages to their project or to roll out a successful pilot to the rest of the college.
- It is perhaps too soon to say whether these improvements are sustainable. There is some tentative indication of changes in perceptions and attitudes among staff which may well lead to a willingness to continue and deepen improvement efforts in the future.
- It is, perhaps, the *process* of action research which could be the single most useful strategy that can be transferred to other providers of education and training. This process encourages diagnosis of the real issues and an appropriate match of strategy to need, as well as effective implementation and evaluation.

Conclusion

The action research development projects have been an effective vehicle for change and improvement in most of the colleges involved in the RQA Programme. This report has evaluated the projects of 87 colleges who took part in Round 2. Three-quarters achieved significant change in student outcomes, and a number of learning points have emerged.

- Change occurs when the action research process is followed. The five stages of the process need equal consideration: analysis; planning and preparation; action, monitoring, adjusting; evaluation; next steps.
- It is possible to identify characteristics at each stage of the process which correlate with success: this report summarises these characteristics and gives examples.
- Particular attention needs to be paid to the analysis of the issue within the individual college context. The real issues are not always easily identified.
- A substantial number of projects suggest that the main focus for improvement should be pedagogy and curriculum.
- The process of managing the change required to effect improvement demands significant 'people' skills in challenging perceptions and behaviours and providing a supportive environment.
- Some of the messages from the Round 1 studies (Martinez 2001) are reinforced by the case studies in this round: in particular, improvement implies staff development, and time is a necessary resource, both for planning and implementation.
- There exists a strong belief, supported by a growing body of evidence, that student retention and achievement can be improved by the efforts of those working in colleges for the benefit of students.

Part Two: Summary of Intervention Strategies

The table below provides a summary of the improvement strategies used by colleges in the Round 2 programme, and the issues arising in their implementation.

For each example of a strategy that worked, there are cases where the same strategy failed to bring about improvement, or raised issues that were not considered in the analysis stage. The 'comments' column attempts to collate the insights gained by the colleges in this report. For ease of reference, the intervention strategies have been grouped under a number of broad headings.

The strategies are divided into two main types: those focusing on curriculum organisation and delivery, and those focusing on student support.

The main message of this report is that any strategy has the potential to bring about improvement, if there is a match between the issue identified, the strategy chosen, and the outcomes desired. No strategy will be suitable for all situations, however similar the situations may appear. The crucial factor is the successful application of the action research process, as described in **Part One** of this report.

Further details on each of the strategies can be obtained by searching the website www.rqa.org.uk. The case studies can be searched using three different sorts of key-word:

- programme or subject area
- type of student or type of subject area
- type of improvement strategy.

Each type of keyword has a drop-down menu which lists the keywords available in that category.

CURRICULUM-FOCUSED STRATEGIES

Strategy	Comments
Target interventions	
Targeting underachieving courses for senior management team (SMT) support	Raised esteem because it was seen as important
Staffing and teams	
Team performance: common weekly tutorials, redesign curriculum	Raised morale
Introduce regular meetings	Increased sense of team/shared concerns
Reduce weekly meetings to monthly ones, with informal meetings about individual students in between	Reduced workload and raised morale
Replace course team meetings with programme area meetings	Allows all course teams to exchange views, share good practice, increase coordination
Set team targets, eg for attendance, retention, achievement	Focuses teams on strategies for achieving targets Motivates staff Identifies potential underperformance and facilitates intervention Provides opportunities to give support to managers and staff Staff must own targets Targets must be realistic – there is a tendency for staff to set overambitious targets for themselves There needs to be an inclusive culture, not a 'blame' culture
Staffing allocation: by unit specialism	Retention fell – students disliked having to form new relationships and new tutors had no background information on the student
Staffing allocation: to maintain relationships	Students, particularly those 'at risk' or low achievers, like to keep one tutor they can grow to trust. They like feeling that the tutor knows them Differentiation issues are easier to deal with as the individuals in a group become better known to the tutor
Timetable team managers to teach on their team	Provides an opportunity for them to identify and support areas of concern

Teaching	
Make expectations of students explicit: give copies of scheme of work and course guide at start of course	Ensure reference is made to them in lessons: redesign as working documents with space for students to write a quick evaluation of the lesson and their own action points
Increase feedback to students	This need not involve huge amounts of extra work for teachers. Make some feedback verbal rather than all written – students appreciate the opportunity to discuss work Include peer feedback – students like positive peer feedback and felt it aided group cohesion
Self-evaluation of lessons	Teachers did not like this, feeling it was not necessary and added to their workload But the manager thought it crucial in raising performance and encouraging reflection on whether the variety of student needs had been met Add areas for evaluation to standard lesson-plan form
Set and check extra reading	Take in a sample rather than mark them all, or students can mark their own or each other's
Use student surveys to find out what students really think of the course	Issues highlighted included course organisation, subject content, assessment overload Outcome was greater coordination between team members and a focus on differentiated teaching and learning methods
Intranet for students – can be either curriculum-focused or student-support-focused	Identify files using hyperlinks. Students must be properly inducted. Allows students to catch up missed work, reducing staff administration time Facility for students to e-mail their tutors had low take-up by students initially
Recognise and praise good progress	Able students can be overlooked – teachers only notice students who cause a problem. Praise is a motivator – recognise it
Principal or team leader sends letter of commendation	Students report a sense of pride – but this needs to be used only when earned to be valued
Liven up induction programme	Place an emphasis on interactive or practical activities Coordinate subject induction and cross-college induction

Curriculum	
Move from linear to modular syllabuses	Confidence can be lost if students perform badly in the first module: give out results in a one-to-one supportive interview Assess whether first modules are too early and do not enter students who are not ready for assessment Give mock examination and follow up with post-assessment student support
Redesign curriculum to build in incremental success	Offer basic communications at the start of the course for those with low achievements Stagger examinations and assessment throughout the year Give fewer formal assessments and more practice ones
Mandatory coursework option	With one-to-one tutorial support Achievement improved
Trips/visits	Particularly good when they happen early in the course Improved retention by group bonding Improved student perception of course Use the learner experience as a motivational tool rather than simply as a source of information for assignments Record experience as part of portfolio/record of achievement Can enhance staff/student relationships
Learning styles and skills	
Exploration of learning styles	Team building The teacher needs to know something about the needs of the students before he or she can plan to meet them – get information before they start by questionnaire, feeder school reference, etc Enjoyed by the students, but they need self-esteem building before they can use the insights Responsibility should be on the students to recognise and expand their learning styles, not on teachers to tailor delivery to suit the students in the class
Teach study skills	Teachers highlight in class notes a student should take Check student files regularly
Staff development	
Dissemination of good practice	Many strategies/processes are already in place, but are used variably. Raise profile of existing good practice
Match up Beacon (excellent) teams with Focus (in need of support) teams	Staff motivation is the key to success – good practice will only be passed on if staff are receptive. Teams which improved their results showed an interest in the Beacon team approaches and attended development events willingly – the

	other teams did not raise achievement
A lecturer from one department worked with staff from another department	Initial friction was overcome by a consultative approach which invited the 'target' team to identify issues
Use staff intranet to publish successful methods and materials	Underused at present
Coaching – peer observations	Make the process interactive, so that 'observed' are invited to comment. Place lecturers in pairs Some staff only want to say/hear positive things – needs to be more challenging
Timetabling	
Reduce changes to student timetables/staffing	Students value consistency and do not like change. If change is unavoidable, manage the student comfort zone by providing support and ensuring links in changeovers
Different course delivery times for different student needs	More class contact time for those in need of it; more self-study time for 'high fliers'
Three-day timetable	Two colleges reported this strategy: both were favourable in reviewing it, quoting higher retention rates and improved student morale Benefits include cutting down on 'spare time' during the day where students lose interest or display behavioural problems around college; and the opportunity it affords students to follow part-time work and thus reduce financial pressures which may lead to drop-out. One problem noted was the reduced opportunity for individual student tutorial support
Recruitment and selection	
Pre-course recruitment day	All students who attended were retained Recruitment was up
Revise enrolment interview procedures – include taster days	Enables mutual student/teacher appraisal

STUDENT-FOCUSED STRATEGIES

Strategy	Comments
Monitoring attendance	
Monitoring attendance	Needs to start early Needs to be supportive, not punitive Find out why they fail to attend – are they bored/failing/not challenged? Teachers are involved in discussing feedback and possible implications for course delivery 'Extra student' file (a spare set of notes), so work missed is easily caught up Colleges report varying outcomes: some found retention improved; one quoted no improvement in attendance, but better data and monitoring; one found attendance reduced, but retention improved! Some students were pleased that an interest was being shown in their welfare and progress Overwhelming support from parents Initially this had impact – but students soon realised that there were no real sanctions in place for absence
By support worker	For older students, being 'chased' can be counterproductive Some adults resent being contacted, either because absence had been recorded incorrectly or because the reason was genuine and unavoidable – ensure procedures are negotiated and agreed For targeted courses with low retention rates and 'at risk' students: dramatic increases in student retention due to individual attention and rigorous monitoring and follow-up of absence The support worker was trained in areas of financial support, such as funds and access, and had excellent interpersonal skills Teachers were more proactive in reporting absence once they knew there was support and reporting back to deal with issues promptly Strategies also included arrangement of work placements for those students with poor employment aspirations Computerised tracking helps attendance monitoring and liaison between teacher and support worker Support worker hours extend to 8pm, so students (and/or parents) can be contacted at home: parents were very appreciative of this effort The cost of the support worker was more than covered by increased retention Difficulties around the relationship between the role of the attendance worker and that of the teacher: this needs to be sensitively handled and the teachers reassured that their professionalism will not be underminedInitial defensive reaction of parents to the telephone/letter contact needs sensitive handling Works best when there is a supportive approach,

	and close liaison with teachers and parental support Works well when linked to negotiated targets drawn up with student/parent Customer-care skills are needed
Student support	
Introduced college bus to an area	Retained more students Recruitment went up
Financial incentives for good attendance	Not valued by 16–18-year-old students – too little and too infrequent. Student survey showed they were more concerned with classroom experience
Access fund	Retention improved for access students Most successful when linked to other support services; establish a consistent system of referral between services Make this an entitlement to overcome student embarrassment Give information as early as possible – present as a package of support
'At risk' register	Make locally relevant, by asking current students their reasons for leaving/staying, then put support in place for those identified as 'at risk': • tutor/mentor to work with student in class, follow up absence, keep diary of problems encountered by student to feed back to teacher • match strategy to the reason the student is 'at risk' • provide specialist support • focus on those areas the college has control over Retention for those identified rose to above college average Identify 'at risk' students even pre-enrolment: support must be in place as early as possible Extend to add names to list after first review
Study buddy	Students swap telephone numbers and e-mails; helps group dynamics Staff workload is reduced as responsibility for 'catching up' rests with the buddy
Skilled tutor intervening for identified 'at risk' students	Nature of additional tutoring support is negotiated with course tutor. Additional progress monitoring with individual students or support/coaching from tutor. Successful when complementing the efforts of well-organised and close-knit teams; less successful when trying to compensate for more disparate or less highly organised programmes
Mentoring/role models	Can be expensive Needs to be in place at the start, before the group forms its own 'pecking order' Integration with college views/procedures needs to be worked out beforehand

Learning support	
Learning support in classroom	Failed – where students were on wrong course Succeeded –where teachers and LSA worked together and feedback from student (via LSA) was used to adapt teaching plans/delivery Progression rates doubled Recording ensures funding units can be claimed Needs sensitivity for LSA to work with teachers to redesign assignments to match language and structure to student needs
Additional learning support (ALS)	Integrated support is not seen as 'extra'; it therefore avoids students opting out Needs a dedicated centre. Students must be matched with staff who can meet their specific need Students are accurately targeted by teachers and achievement, following ALS, is up on predicted grade Staff need to be specialist and need to be trained. Teachers should walk with students to the centre, introduce them to staff, show where the support will take place, participate in the explanation of support needed and stay with the student while the appointment is negotiated and the registration form is completed
Initial needs assessment by screening	Some diagnostic tests are better than others – search carefully for one that meets your exact needs
Front-load the deployment of part-time staff to deliver induction and initial needs assessment	Addresses the need to complete the screening process early, and put support in place quickly, to 'save' very early leavers
Student targets	
Student target grades	Improved A-E achievement, but not A-C Terminology needs careful attention Needs to be combined with staff training to ensure it is presented to students in a constructive way More effective if students have an input into achievement/progress, eg by completing a self-assessment before the review Ensure that the personal tutor gets information before the review, to give an overview and help identify trends Students are positive about the value; tutors are less convinced The quality and consistency of target-setting remains an issue Effective in changing student behaviour and study habits
Profiling/individual student action planning	Can form a basis for the negotiation of qualitative targets Seen as a useful diagnostic tool Mainly positive results including • closer understanding and measurement of learner capability

	• more focused tutorials, support, progress review • enhanced dialogue with individuals • improvement in the quality of work, attendance, attitude and behaviour • positive attitudes correlate with high scores • can be a useful motivator • aids communication in tutorial sessions • several colleges report improved retention: in one college, one course reported slightly lower retention Works best where: • student self-assessment is carried out initially • a combination of learner, tutor and peer assessment is used – these can be scored and placed as different coloured lines on a graph to give a visual impression of the 'gap' • constructive discussion follows, resulting in a deeper understanding • action plans are drawn up by the student as a result, signed by tutor/parent, and regularly reviewed • it is built into assignments as well as tutorial review

Appendix: List of Colleges

Accrington and Rossendale
Askham Bryan
Barnet
Barnfield
Basildon
Bishop Burton
Bolton
Bridgewater
Capel Manor
Chichester College of Arts, Science and Technology
Cirencester
Croydon
Derby Tertiary College Wilmorton
Doncaster
Eastleigh
Easton
Eccles
Enfield
Exeter
Farnborough College of Technology
Franklin
Furness
Greenhead
Grimsby
Hackney Community College
Halton
Hammersmith and West London
Harrow
Hastings
Havant
Havering
Henley Coventry
Henley-on-Thames
Huddersfield New College
Huddersfield Technical College
Hugh Baird College
Huntingdonshire Regional College
Kensington and Chelsea
Lancaster and Morecambe
Leeds College of Technology
Leicester
Lewisham
Milton Keynes
Nelson and Colne
New College Swindon
New College Telford
North East Worcestershire
North Hertfordshire
North Tyneside
Northampton
Northumberland
Norwich City College of Further and Higher Education
Palmer's
Penwith
Preston
Priestley Sixth Form and Community College
Prior Pursglove
Reigate

Richard Huish
Richmond Adult Community College
Richmond upon Thames
Rother Valley
Rotherham College of Arts and Technology
Saint Marys Blackburn
Salisbury
SEEVIC
Sir George Monoux
South Birmingham
South East Essex
South Nottinghamshire
Southampton
Southgate
Stamford
Sutton Coldfield
Tamworth and Lichfield
Thanet
Thomas Danby
Tower Hamlets
Trowbridge
Walsall College of Arts and Technology
West Cumbria
West Herts
West Suffolk
West Thames
Weston
Weymouth
Worcester College of Technology
York

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